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ABSTRACT

A profile of the attitudes and environment of the child from an impoverished family is drawn, illustrating the factors that inhibit such a child in developing creative problem-solving skills. The attitudes and atmosphere of the poverty home and culture are outlined. It is pointed out that limited vocabulary and low motivation are typical of such homes, making adjustment to school and the cultural values emphasized there difficult. The importance of developing the ability to fantasize and to increase language skills in poor children is stressed. (JD)

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CREATIVITY AND THE POVERTY CHILD

by Bruce Mitchell*

The literature dealing with the topic of creativity and the creative problem-solving process has multiplied astonishingly during the past twenty-five years. Since J. P. Guilford read his famous paper at the 1950 national meeting of the American Psychological Association, a multitude of research and theories pertaining to the subject has appeared in the literature. In his presentation, Guilford indicated that prior to that time, only 123 of the psychological abstracts dealt with that subject.

Thus, it can be seen that the subject is very new and most of the work has been done during the past twenty-five years. During this time, a number of inservice programs have been generated to increase the level of importance given the topic in public school classroom environments. Among the more successful was the Goleta Union School District Creativity Project in 1966-68.

Research based on pre- and post-measures of the Minnesota Tests of Creative Thinking indicate that the inservice program was successful in improving creativity test scores of students who were in classrooms of participating teachers.** These and other studies would seem to indicate that the development of increased openness and flexibility on the part of elementary teachers is indeed capable of establishing classroom climates which assist in the development of creative thinking skills.

As one visits large numbers of public schools, however, it becomes increasingly obvious that the job of developing creative thinking skills is still not getting done and that little emphasis is actually placed on the development of creative problem solving skills. In fact, according to Jerome Bruner, the crisis in American Education has reached alarming proportions. He has written the following:

> Education is in a state of crisis. It has failed to respond to challenging social needs — lagging behind rather than leading. My last six months' work on early education and social class, for example, convinces me that the educational system is in effect our way of maintaining a class system — a group at the bottom. It cripples the capacity of children in the lowest socioeconomic quarter of the population to participate effectively in society, and does so early and effectively.***

Although Bruner is not addressing himself directly to the topic of creativity, there are some obvious implications. His latter statement pertaining to the crippling effect of public education on children from the culture of poverty warrants further scrutiny since it corroborates the findings of many other educational sociologists. That public schools have failed to meet the needs of youngsters from the culture of poverty can be seen by examining the statistics pertaining to dropout rates of poor children. The public schools, a product of the middle-class society, have failed to grasp the urgency of the situation.

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The problem is further compounded when turning to the extent of creative problem solving potential developed by youth from poverty cultures. The importance in developing such skills is self evident. By the year 2000, social scientists tell us that the world will be faced with famine, lack of oxygen, extensive pollution, and mass overcrowding. Multitudes of new jobs, ever-increasing change, and other factors all bear testimony to the need for developing creative potential. For if tomorrow's person is to survive such a changeable millieu, it would appear necessary that such creative problem solving skills certainly should be developed to their fullest in order to merely survive.

The central thesis of this paper is that the poverty culture lacks these skills more than other segments of the society. Schools in poverty areas, then, need to examine inservice programs similar to Goleta's in order to develop this potential.

Conclusions from research studies conducted by Newton Metfessel, Principal Investigator of Project Potential through the University of Southern California, reveal a number of fascinating insights pertaining to children from poverty cultures. Such youngsters . . . .

1. Typically have parents who do not have the language skills to enable them to foster their children's language and cognitive development.
2. Typically come from homes where there is a sparcity of objects such as toys and play materials of different colors, sizes, and shapes. Consequently, the children receive little or no training in the concepts of color, directionality, position, or relative size.
3. Typically are crippled in language development because they do not perceive of the concept that objects have names and that the same object may have different names. This may be one of the major reasons why poor children have later difficulty in coping with instruction in reading.
4. Typically lack a family environment in which questions are asked or answered. Consequently, these children do not perceive of adults in general as people from whom you ask questions and receive answers, a fundamental postulate on which the school culture is organized.
5. Are typically disciplined by physical force. In the school culture, discipline is invariably through reason (insight building) or deprivation of privilege. Since reason is generally not used in the poverty home, the child has had little opportunity to build insights into the causes and consequences of his own behavior. In school settings, he reacts to 'reason' discomforted.
6. Typically have little encouragement of their fantasy lives. Middle class parents will generally accept a child's imaginary playmate, for example, and may even enter into imaginary play. The parent from the culture of poverty tends to remain neutral and on several occasions in the instance of imaginary playmates, remonstrate their child for 'lying.'
7. Typically have parents working at jobs which require little education; this frequently gives the child the impression that school is not particularly important in terms of preparation for life.
8. Typically have had little or no out-of-school experiences which are translatable to the school culture. Out-of-school resources such as zoos, museums, libraries, and exhibition halls were found to be unfamiliar to the majority of the children. Over half, as well, had never been to the Pacific Ocean, although it was less than twenty-five miles away.

9. Frequently have parents who are concerned that too much formal education may 'spoil' their child. Anxiety about losing status in the eyes of their growing offspring as educational differences are increased is a particular manifestation of this concern.

10. Frequently have parents who feel that the family is pre-eminent over school attendance laws. Consequently, what is defined as truancy by the school may be viewed as a sign of loyalty by the parents. Also, the observed truancy of older brothers and sisters in situations not related to family welfare or family well-being contributes to patterns of poor attendance.

11. Frequently come from a home environment with such a paucity of objects that the child's conceptual formation development is adversely affected. For the purpose of the Project Potential research, concepts were defined as abstractions from things (concrete objects). This demands that a subject have concrete objects on which to build abstractions (identify similarities and differences) in order to generalize to new situations.

12. Frequently come from a home environment with such a paucity of objects that their level of curiosity is affected. One develops curiosity, generally, by having things to be curious about. Certainly the lack of curiosity affects both motivational patterns and the development of creative behavior.

13. Frequently have parents who communicate negative appraisals of the school establishment because of their own difficulties in coping with the school culture. By a process of horizontal acculturation in which the school goes into the home, the vertical acculturation demanded by the school establishment is facilitated.

14. Frequently have parents who lack a basic understanding of the educative process to such an extent that the school is perceived as a place where 'magic' occurs, e.g., the child learns to read, write, and spell. One of the major benefits of having parental participation in school programs, particularly pre-school, is the eradication of this belief which occurs in inverse relationship to their understanding of the educative process.

15. Frequently have homes in which the physical environment mitigates against the development of listening skills. The home is frequently so noisy that the child learns to 'tune out.' This not only occurs in situations of yelling and screaming, but also in the general noise level increased in cramped living quarters by such things as radio and television. The kind of television watched in the homes of the poor has little in it that is translatable to the school culture.

16. Typically are characterized by weak ego-development, a lack of self-confidence, and a negative self-concept. These conflicting feelings about themselves frequently result in exaggerated positive and negative attitudes towards others.

17. Frequently fail because they expect to fail which only tends to reinforce their feelings of inadequacy.

18. Frequently have had little experience in receiving approval for success in a learning task, an assumption on which the school culture is organized. Teachers should be sensitive to the fact that these children frequently perceive praise in context of evaluation rather than reward.

19. Typically are placed at a marked disadvantage in timed test situations. Clocks and watches have been characterized as 'middle class gods.' For children from the culture of poverty the concept of the 'slow gifted' (Reissman, 1962) is tenable from the results of the present evaluation.

20. Typically use a great many words with fair precision, but not those words representative of the school culture. The child who says, 'I'm going to 'carry' him home,' is using a term alien to the school establishment but well founded in such well known songs as 'Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,' and the song line, 'I looked over Jordan and what did I see, comin' for to carry me home.' The role of the teacher is to explain alternative ways of saying things rather than one of rejection of the alien terminology.*

While all of Metfessel's conclusions have a direct relationship to the creative problem solving limitation of children, several bear further scrutiny in terms of the kinds of classroom practices which would appear to have benefit for perpetuating creative thinking skills for school children. Conclusion number three refers to the notion of language development. This research conclusion indicates that poverty youth have difficulty relating the names of objects to the actual object. Sometimes this is due to the unique characteristics of poverty homes. Some tend to be more non-verbal than those of middle class homes. Often, poverty parents must spend so much time and energy trying merely to feed and clothe their families that little attention can be shown to the youngsters and their verbal skill development. Hence, many such children have very poor verbal skills which limits verbal fluency, one of Metfessel's Twenty-Six Correlates of Creative Thinking.**

Children lacking these skills must be subjected to a variety of classroom activities designed to increase their basic vocabularies. Opportunities must be provided for children to learn names of objects. Children could, for example, list all the objects they can think of that are red, rough, smooth, long, short, edible, heavy, etc. Brainstorming activities give youngsters the opportunity to commence increasing their fluency potential. Thinking of as many ways as possible for shining a pair of shoes, traveling from Los Angeles to New York, fixing a rocket ship, etc., are sample activities which will assist in the development of fluency skills.

The fact that many poverty homes frequently ask or answer questions (conclusion number four) also seriously limits vocabulary development and concept formation. When families are concerned with the qcquisition of the basic necessities, there is often precious little time left for such activities. Thus, children from such families need work dealing with word synonyms, the use of analogies, invention of new words to describe feelings or events, and the writing of simple sentences. In addition, students need lots of opportunities to play with words in order to develop a better vocabulary and grow more comfortable in general word usage.

The lack of fantasy play in the lives of poverty children (conclusion number six) is certainly one of the most serious detriments to creativity. A very common role of the middle class parent is to participate with the child in fantasy games. When a young child from a middle class family comes into the house and says, "Mom, there's a giant lion playing in our back yard," Mom will usually create a play atmosphere with the child, responding with something like, "Oh, how nice. Let's invite him in for lunch!" When the poverty child says this, the parent is likely to reward this bit of fantasy with a swat and an admonishment which sounds something like, "Don't lie to me ever again!" Consequently, the poverty youngster grows up all too often with inadequate verbal originality skills. The teacher should read fantasy stories

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* Newton Metfessel, "Conclusion from Previous Research Findings Which Were Validated by the Research and Evaluation Conducted by the Staff of Project Potential" (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1965), Mimeographed.

**Newton Metfessel, "Twenty-Six Correlates of Creative Thinking" (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1965), Mimeographed.

and encourage the student to tell his own fantasy stories to someone else or into the tape recorder. Original ideas and acts should be rewarded. Drama, puppetry, and role playing constitute excellent activities for developing originality skills.

Conclusion number eleven pertains to the lack of objects in many homes of the poverty culture. Consequently, children often come to school not really knowing the names of many basic objects. Poverty families, in addition to not having money for purchasing many of the items commonly found in middle-class homes, often are unable to spend adequate time with their youngsters in object identification. While middle-class parents commonly spend much time with their children in these activities ("Now Johnnie, what is this?"), the poverty home is often too heavily occupied with finding food, jobs, etc., to have the stamina for such activities. Therefore, in order to meet these needs, teachers need to become pack-rats in order to collect as much realia as they can for the room. This provides teachers and children with not only a lot of motivational devices but also vehicles for developing an increase in vocabulary skills which are so crucial in developing fluency skills. The room should look like a museum. Depending on the children's age, items can be marked in order to familiarize students with the names (symbol of objects) as quickly as possible.

This lack of objects in the home also tends to limit the development of a sharp curiosity. Classroom activities must be designed to stimulate an inquisitive perspective toward the environment. The pupil must learn to make use of the information possessed. Lots of "why" questions need to be asked and children must be surrounded by objects to arouse the curiosity. "What would happen if" discussion questions should be utilized. Unusual-uses questions can be asked about unconventional ways of using items such as cardboard boxes, bricks, cans, etc.

SUMMARY

The Metfessel study points out many conditions of poverty relative to creative problem solving skills. These students often possess serious handicaps which drastically inhibit the creative potential. Youth need more opportunities to develop their vocabulary. Fantasy games help develop originality. Rooms should be interesting places which stimulate the student's curiosity. Activities must be utilized in order to increase the vocabulary levels of poverty children.

Even though our schools have more topics than can be adequately dealt with, it is becoming increasingly important to deal with the development of creativity. The uncertainty of tomorrow's world would certainly dictate to educators the critical urgency of developing creativity skills in all our citizens. . . if our civilization is to survive somehow.